

Mike Pompeo Pissing in the Wind in Iraq

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Pompeo is without doubt the worst Sec. of State in American History

Mike Pompeo went to put the thumbscrews on the Iraqi government this week. No more electrical power from Iran, he told them, and make sure those pesky Iranians don't attack our boys in that great American base in Iraq which Trump was boasting about. The New York Times numbingly told us that his trip was "shrouded in secrecy" – if only it had been. Then at least the US secretary of state could have paid a visit to Iran's most important supporter in the Iraqi parliament.



The Triumvirate of FAILURE; Pompeo Middle, flanked by Bolton and Pence

I met Hadi al-Ameri in Baghdad a few days before Pompeo turned up in town. A tough, curmudgeonly, 64-year-old bearded ex-militia leader, fluent in Persian and in the Shia politics of Iraq, he is a personal friend of Qassem Suleimani – commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force and America's latest "super-terrorist" in the Middle East – and fought alongside Iran in its eight-year war with Saddam.

I can imagine what he might have told Pompeo, because this is what he told me over tea in his Baghdad office.

"Pity America, because of this crazy Trump! There were 180,000 American troops here with tanks and all their equipment and we did not surrender to their intentions or wishes. Today, we want to build an independent Iraq, strong and sovereign in the region and we will make good relations with all the regional countries for the interests of the people of Iraq – not for America or for Saudi Arabia or for Iran. We will not allow America to use Iraq to watch regional countries. And we will not allow Iraq to become a battlefield for other countries to clear their debts."

Mark those words: "Not ... for Iran." Because al-Ameri presents himself as an Iraqi nationalist first, a Shia second – his political enemies in Iraq will disagree. He prides himself on his leadership of the old Badr Brigade and he played a prominent role in the struggle against ISIS in 2014.

At one point in the ferocious battles against the Sunni cult, his own Shia Iraqi "Popular Mobilisation Force" [al-Hashd al-Shaabi] was allied not only with Kurdish militiamen and the Iraqi army but – indirectly – with the US military, which was bombing ISIS. I can see how Pompeo and he might have

got on quite well – provided, of course, their meeting was “shrouded in secrecy”.

“America is not the old America,” al-Ameri says. “It is weaker than ever. They couldn’t do anything in Venezuela – or Cuba, their neighbour, when they were a great power. What can they do here? Let Trump settle his problems with congress first. Are you afraid of America’s power? If they [fight here], they will face the defeat that they faced in Vietnam.

“They don’t have the right to force their will on other nations. Let them try. Let them start in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine. Mohammed bin Salman [of Saudi Arabia] and Netanyahu could not hurt Gaza which is adjacent to them. The Israelis couldn’t do it in southern Lebanon or on Golan. I’m telling you – anybody who tries this in Iraq will lose.” I rather think Gaza is very badly hurt. Lebanon, too, from time to time.

Then al-Ameri slips back into his Iraqi mould. He is a former minister of transport and sits in the Baghdad parliament as a member of the United Iraqi Alliance – representing Shia religious parties – and quickly represents himself as a super-patriot.

“We are part of the state of Iraq. We are considered as part of the Iraqi government. Anyone who attacks us, the Iraqi people will fight back. We don’t need [Iran’s] help. We have the resources and the ability to do this ourselves. I had a meeting with General [George] Casey. I told him: ‘I am stronger than you. You are depending on the authority of occupation. But you will leave and we will stay’.”

General George William Casey, I should add, was the US commander in Iraq from 2004 till 2007 and largely opposed the American military “surge” in the country, preferring to reduce his forces and hand security powers to Iraq. He later became US army chief of staff. I have a suspicion that al-Ameri quite liked him because Casey was known as a realist, and mercifully retired long before the Age of Trump.

Al-Ameri, however, prefers to base his military confidence on Iraq’s resistance to ISIS – or Daesh, as he inevitably calls it in Arabic – and manages to do so without once mentioning the word “Shia”.

“In 2014, the whole of our [government] military organisation [trained by the Americans] began to fall down. Mosul, Salahuddin, Kirkuk, Anbar, a big part of Diyala – Daesh took them and surrounded Baghdad. At this time, every historian was saying that Iraq is gone. I told them we will win. And I said this in the very first days. The army’s [sic] morale was below zero.

“And the Americans did not take part in the battle until they saw us advancing” – by “us” he means the Iraqi Shia militias, although al-Ameri does not say this. “And most of the operations we performed, they did not take part. We liberated Ramadi without their help and most of Salahuddin province without their help. We liberated Fallujah without their help. The Americans [even] opposed us going into Fallujah. They participated in [the battle for] the centre of Ramadi – that’s all. Mosul, they turned it into rubble.”

Al-Ameri is famous – or infamous, depending on your point of view – for allegedly permitting Iranian military flights to pass over Iraq with weapons for the Syrian army when he was Iraqi minister of transport. He has several times denied this. But that wasn’t quite what he told me.

“The American ambassador [in Baghdad] came to see me when I was minister,” he recalls. “He said: ‘We have to prevent the Iranian flights going to Syria.’ I said: ‘You don’t have the right to give orders. There is a world organisation [the UN] which organises international flights. I don’t take orders from you. I am telling you, Daesh are

terrorists that you collected around the world - and one day you will have to fight them and they will bring evil to Europe.' And six months later..."

Al-Ameri agrees that Iran helped Assad and Russia in Syria. "Iran supported Syria at a critical time and they stopped [the Islamist advance] and the Russians got involved. Hezbollah helped. The Syrian army fought, with help from Hezbollah. Our Popular Mobilisation Force played the same role in Iraq as the Hezbollah did in Syria."

This is an intriguing parallel, although the Syrian army would surely say that the Russians rather than the Iranians were their most important military allies. But we are moving into familiar political countryside. "If America is against us [in the future], the Iraqi army will [now] be united against them. They tried to destroy Iraq and Syria at the same time ... But Iraq is united. Sectarianism is dead. The Americans used to say 'al-Ameri is sectarian'. But now al-Ameri is more popular among Sunnis than Shia. As for the Saudis, they have been very stupid and Mohammed bin Salman made a childish move in Yemen. The Americans - they told me that the Yemen war would end in two weeks, then 40 days, then four months and now it is five years. The Saudis are losing every day and sacrificing every day."

And now it's time, I guess, for what I might journalistically call "Red Alert". Iran, al-Ameri says, "know their interests well. We can talk about our interests, our duties. If we are attacked, definitely Russia and China will not stay neutral. Tehran is going to be with us. What I know about the Iranian people is that the more pressure they receive, the more united they get."

"Iran was united when President [Hassan] Rouhani was opening to the west and there were a lot of internal problems. It was the sanctions which made Iran develop ballistic missiles and nuclear centrifuges. The more pressure they are under, the greater their scientific dependence will be."

Al-Ameri says he believes in the open market, a free economy. He reminds me that much of Iran's economy is private sector, including the electricity which is provided to Iraq by Iran.

As for Qassem Suleimani, the Iranian general the Americans would most like to obliterate - until, I suppose, another Iranian general comes along to annoy them - al-Ameri says "he helped us a lot in coordinating the opposition. And during the battle with Daesh, he helped the Iraqis a lot on behalf of the Iranian nation. He was a good adviser. Many of his advisers - in all, there were not more than a hundred advisers [in all Iraq] - were martyred [sic] on Iraqi land. They were on the front lines with him and some of the best ones died. This is why they had a big effect in the battle."

Thus quoth al-Ameri. And much of what he said, of course, was what the Iranians say. His version of history is also an Iranian version. Ask him if he is Iran's voice in Iraq and al-Ameri bursts into laughter at such a preposterous idea. Even so, I give him two of my business cards. One for him and one for Suleimani. I want an interview with this man, I said. Al-Ameri put up his hands. "I don't know when I shall next be seeing him," he says. I bet.

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